

## Poetic misuse of technology and functional systems (O'Connell, 2015)

By the 1990s it had become unimpressive to point out that 'art' could be produced using computers too. The suggestion that hardware and software amounted to an additional tool in the box like a set of brushes or musical instrument revealed naivety on two fronts. Firstly, new media and the emerging network represented not just a change in degree but one in kind. Secondly, the fact that a self-critiquing and at times self-destructive 'art system'<sup>1</sup> had evolved during the twentieth century was overlooked. In this undermining of itself in fact, art had voluntarily embraced, if not predicted, what would become inevitable across many arenas with the emergence of computing.

Nowadays a well-informed, questioning and truly interdisciplinary class of practitioners exists. 'We are all computer people now' pointed out Sherry Turkle (2004, p.B26) and there is no escaping the influence of computerisation on the, already highly challenged, concept of art. Claire Bishop asserted that 'the digital revolution opens up a new dematerialized, deauthored, and unmarketable reality of collective culture' which potentially 'signals the impending obsolescence of visual art itself' (2012b, p.441). The need to embrace the gist of what Bishop is saying feels compulsory though the end of art, like many other 'end of's, never seems to quite arrive. Given this lingering on of something which should apparently have disappeared I have become interested in the possibility of finding poetic meaning amidst the technological flux. Operating in this way amounts to something odd, a defence of the singular in a world which expects networking, collaboration, teamwork and generous participation. Kenneth Goldsmith's radical usages of the new situation, his extreme appropriation, combined with a refusal to throw the art baby out with the bathwater, appears in tune with the spirit being referred to (2011).

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<sup>1</sup> As Niklas Luhmann would describe it (2000)



**Figure 1** From Sophie Calle's *The Shadow*, 1981. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2017

The projects I do now and am interested in have precedents, although an incredibly rich new source of raw material has become available which changes the situation. Embedded within the highly networked techno-industrial infrastructure are assets, artefacts, data and experiences which call to be extracted and played with. In recent years, I have engaged in three interventions which, in retrospect, have something in common with Sophie Calle's early work. Her *The Shadow*, 1981 (Figure 1) for example, in which an unwitting detective was hired to follow her and then report back with notes and photographs (Calle and Auster, 2007, pp.101–112), was a decade or two ahead of its time. It is no longer necessary to hire a specialist to play these kinds of games. The ubiquity of surveillance and feedback loops is such that even material which has been incidentally recorded is superior to what Calle's human detective produced. What follows is a description of the first of the three initiatives

and an attempt to consider its implications, along with briefer references to two later interventions.

Photography has had a relationship with traffic-law enforcement systems for some time. Speed cameras have been a common feature for decades: in the 1990s automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) was rolled out across the UK, and now cameras and intelligent systems police London's congestion zone without even requiring human intervention. An incident in the mid-noughties, when an acquaintance to whom I had loaned my car, was captured by bus-lane enforcement camera, highlighted the fact that this kind of sophisticated surveillance was increasingly in use. Apart from the unpleasant fact of a fine having to be paid and a degree of *schadenfreude* being inevitable the episode did make me wonder. Why should this story and the resulting documentation be of interest? The small black and white photograph, which arrived by post in the weeks after the incident, depicting my Volkswagen Polo in blatant contravention, driving along a London bus lane, was certainly a source of entertainment. The reasons the image triggered laughter were not obvious. I was not aware of the offence until the letter was opened so perhaps the surprise acted as a punch-line of sorts. The comedy value was amplified by anthropomorphic connotations, the thought that a camera had of its own accord shown interest in my modest vehicle, or sent a holiday snap from the car's day out in London. Despite its cleverness artificial intelligence always seems funny or stupid to begin with.

Moving forward in time, in 2010 I created an exhibition of photographs selected from hundreds of images obtained from Brighton and Hove City Council's parking contravention system (O'Connell, 2013b; c; Sheerin, 2011). Three 'night shots' from this collection, representing the same incident of poor parking, had appeared commendable on aesthetic grounds, rich according to concepts of interest to me and useful in that, at a stretch, analogies could be made with Renaissance painting or other aspects of art history. Initially for practical reasons the three images were

dissected vertically and the results printed on six 1.2m x 1.8m sheets of corrugated plastic (Figure 2), so that each pair corresponded roughly to the size of the car in question (a Ford Ka). The painterly qualities of these low-resolution jpegs became particularly apparent when they were enlarged. Secondly, the darkness does not just obscure but provides contrast with other highlights in the image and creates



**Figure 2** *Contra-Invention* at Frieze-Greene Gallery, Brighton, 2010. © Mocksim

challenge fitting with my desire to inject interactivity but of the less blatant variety. Bird dropping, on the bonnet of the car, stands out, arguably functioning as 'punctum', in Roland Barthes' famous usage (1993). Characters in the background are rendered more interesting not less, in being concealed so that the image entices the viewer. While unusual subject matter and methods, were being worked with, the associations with the night-shot tradition in art photography and other clichés of composition were not something I wished to avoid. Certain modernist principles were being abided by such as 'truth to materials', the desire to expose the workings

and to undermine illusion. Though easily mistaken for tongue-in-cheek, formal considerations were a primary concern in creating this work and in setting up the exhibition. The perceived elitism of the 'white cube' was not shunned either: the results could simply have been posted online, but were not. It has become unfashionable to defend art for its own sake but *Contra-Invention* permitted a simultaneous play with tradition along with highlighting both process and factors of conceptual interest.

Brighton had led the way with the use of cameras by Traffic Wardens (correctly termed Civil Enforcement Officers, abbreviated to CEOs as if to emphasise their status). Though it is close to the busy port of Shoreham and had recently achieved 'city status', Brighton and Hove lacks key characteristics of a typical industrial city. It is an amalgamation of a number of urban areas running along the coast; there never was a big polluted river nor many factories and warehouses. The place is seen as a playground of sorts in fact and a location for entertainment (no pejorative intended). The parking fine system with its uniformed staff, technologies and processes (Figure 3) compensates for this unconscious deficiency and also confounds the other association of Brighton with the libertarian mind-set. Certainly the scale and intensity of parking enforcement in the city has often been referred to. The suggestion was, and still is, frequently made that the primary aims are not traffic-related at all but to generate revenue and on this front, for example, according to a 2013 report, only 'Brighton and Hove and Cornwall councils broke into a top 10 dominated by London authorities' (Association, 2013). So, in the interest of sidestepping the visual stereotypes usually associated with the city but also with a view to honest observation of the curiously overlooked set of activities it seemed reasonable, L. S. Lowry style, to seek inspiration precisely in this industry.

I had speculated as to how easy it would be to obtain the 'contravention images' which CEOs collect as part of their duties. One possibility was to intentionally park badly in order to access the photographs afterwards but that



**Figure 3** Parking Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) in action, 2010. © Mocksim

would have meant hiring a car, paying fines on top and been preventatively slow. Doubtless when one wants a fine, the wardens are nowhere to be found. The ethical implications and possible legal ones of such an approach were not challenges I wanted face. Then I chanced upon a ticket, discarded in anger most likely because it was torn in half (Figure 5). It turned out that by entering just two items of information from the found fine, the car registration mark and a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) number, onto the council's online payment system, the contravention images could be accessed, viewed and even downloaded in jpeg format! The next eureka moment was in realising that of course the PCN number was visible on the



tickets because in Brighton (unlike elsewhere) the outer packaging was composed of transparent film<sup>2</sup>. It would be possible to simply record the registration and PCN number from ticketed cars on passing without dubious interference. And what better device to record this information with than mobile phone camera and/or built-in voice recorder? It would be possible to mimic the wardens and go about capturing contravention images and data.



**Figure 4** *Contra-Invention* at Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona, 2013. © Pavel Maria Smejkal

So, in more ways than one the activity was photography-related. *Contra-Invention* was meta-photography but also a comment on the contemporary situation in which cameras are employed for surveillance, and secondly, the phenomenon of

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<sup>2</sup> Since then the system in Brighton has changed. At the time of writing the fines are sealed in opaque packaging as had previously been the case in most boroughs. In addition, a warning against tampering is printed on front. Presumably the change in Brighton was influenced by the publicity *Contra-Invention* received. Local newspapers reported on it (Elliott, 2010a; b), the catalogue was included in Martin Parr's Best Book List (Photo-eye, 2010), the exhibition toured Europe (Figure 4) as part of a prominent group show called *From Here On* (Chéroux et al., 2011; Fontcuberta, 2013; O'Hagan, 2013) and it was nominated for the *Deutsche Börse Photography Prize*, 2012.

‘sousveillance’, which is increasingly discussed. The use of camera as defence-weapon and means of monitoring power is less often referred to, nor is the more complex point that mechanisms, employed by bureaucracies, feedback on themselves occasionally, exposing and even limiting the very authority which is purportedly in control<sup>3</sup>. *Contra-Invention* represented partial engagement with these concerns, albeit acted out in the realm of not so glamorous, municipal policing. Edward Snowden or WikiLeaks type spectacle this was not. Rather than over-emphasise the confrontational, the aim here was to remain below the radar politically. Instead the CEOs and their procedures were treated lightly and intentionally misunderstood, not least as a means of bypassing the usual complaint-filled anecdotes which surround parking law enforcement. The investigation, if it can be called that, revealed a more complex set of behaviours than the common crude portrayals. However, I wanted to believe that these discoveries and amateur anthropology represented a secondary feature of the project. Little attempt was being made to be comprehensive or scientific. The process dynamics, relationships, procedures, communications were of interest at the time because it was thought that these factors would somehow work their way visibly into the resulting photographs. The emphasis on photography turned out to be convenient because in the process of accumulating material I realised that the increasingly globally-significant Brighton Photo Biennial was approaching. Not only that but the key theme in 2010 would be vernacular photography. Historically controversial photographer Martin Parr would be curating and giving the ‘found image’ special status. The idea that a show of this work could be presented during the Biennial, so that it would be intentionally considered as

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<sup>3</sup> Apocalyptic fears of a one-directional Orwellian scenario unfolding have been undermined somewhat by the spread of hand-held devices. The ubiquity of recording technology means monitoring back of the state is possible via ‘citizen journalism’ but even incidental footage acts as a check on hegemonic excess. The case of Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1991 was an early example. Ian Tomlinson in London 2009 and pro-democracy protestor Ken Tsang in Hong Kong 2014 are two other illustrations of this point.

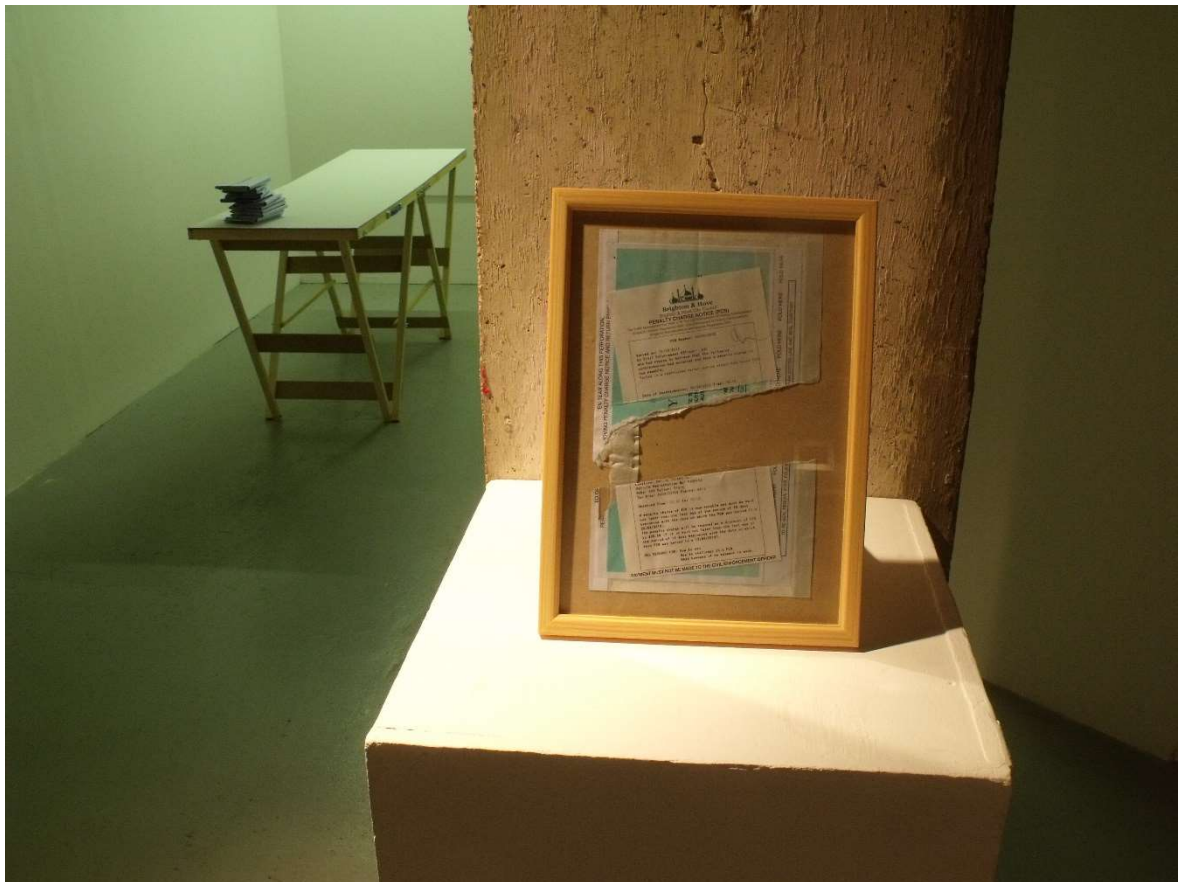


critical or conceptual photography, became increasingly appealing. At this point further links with photography were actively sought. On inspection it was discovered that the EXIF information and metadata often embedded in digital images had not been stripped off the downloaded jpegs. Each image contained information about camera type, shutter speed, aperture and lens angle the wardens had used: the kinds of records classic photography-geeks are keenly interested in. Secondly, it was discovered that the three-digit code visible on the fronts of issued fines coincided with the figure on CEOs' shoulder straps. In other words, if desired, photographers could be matched with their photographs. It was enough, instead of choosing such an obsessive route, to indicate that this cross-referencing was possible by presenting the data as part of the exhibition.

The photography link does not prevent other kinds of framing or musing on the significance of these actions. As well as being credited as the inventor of photography, Nicéphore Niépce created the first internal combustion engine. The tool which would allow far away scenes to be viewed without having to move, originated from the same brain that revolutionised transportation. A similar contrary development can be noticed in recent history. The advent of the internet appeared to coincide with the arrival of low cost airlines. Just as travel became more unnecessary the cost of it dropped dramatically. Cars and cameras have a long and multifaceted relationship which continues today but in the form of a tense stand-off. Or seeing that motorcars were status symbols and still are to a point, at least our CEOs are paying attention and respectful of that vanity.

Another way of thinking about the process is through the lens of media theory. A line of communication exists between CEO and driver, mediated through the car itself, an online system, the law, various procedures and cameras. Even though the two key human players rarely meet they are joined in a feedforward/feedback loop. When they do actually come into each others' physical

proximity, a familiar performance unfolds. The stage has been set. Driver and warden have clear roles. Verbal abuse, expressions of indignation and outrage are the trained responses. The system includes other mini-rituals. In issuing tickets strict guidelines are followed. A CEO waits for five minutes, puts on his or her official cap, generates the documentation using a specialised device, places that ticket behind the wiper so that it is visible, and then moves around the vehicle capturing six, eight or more images as evidence, before removing the cap and moving on.



**Figure 5** Torn parking fine, *Contra-Invention*, Friese-Greene Gallery, Brighton, 2010. © Mocksim

The aporia of being able to ‘intentionally misunderstand’ is one interpretation of a term I’ve coined, ‘artificial stupidity’, and represents an important dimension to the theme of my PhD thesis. The downside of intelligence is being explored because of my hunch that as well as the usual dubious connotations of ‘dumbing down’, being able to dip into these states might reap rewards. By adopting an innocent or stupid mindset, just as the comedic actor does when exercising that peculiar ability to

‘fool themselves’ on stage, new breakthroughs and discoveries are made. Of course a person needs to be able to revert back so as to be able to recognise the worth of these.

The photography references and usages increased as the project progressed. Just as CEOs made records of offending vehicles, they could be captured in the act of issuing fines, on my mobile device (a Nokia 6500c and then Nokia 6700c-1). Also, I



**Figure 6** *Contra-Invention*, a later example of the artist captured on camera, 2012. © Mocksim

began deliberately manoeuvring my way into their field of view in an attempt to appear in their photographs. The phone handset played a part in these ruses. It was better to give the impression of being in conversation, making a call and distracted instead of loitering (Figure 6). And the knack of capturing CEOs in action while the device was held to my ear in pretend-dialogue amounted to another new craft skill, comparable with the methods used by street-photographers in the past, not wanting to be noticed by their subjects. The process of waiting for images to appear online, which took a day or so from point of capture, was evocative of when one had to wait

for a film to be developed. A degree of trepidation and excitement was inevitable. Had the attempt to get into frame succeeded? Would the images even be available? (When fines were paid quickly then access was denied so there was always the possibility of disappointment.)



**Figure 7** *Contra-Invention* 'reflectogram', 2010. © Mocksim

Further adventures followed and more discoveries were made. Officers sometimes captured themselves in reflection. One of the resulting images was particularly revealing in this respect (Figure 7), and later used by conceptual photographer Joan Fontcuberta with students as part of 'a class about what [he] calls "reflectograms" (selfies taken in front of a mirroring surface)'. The way teams of CEOs work together became apparent, many incidents and potential confrontations were witnessed and documented but most of it never found its way into the final exhibition. In the end the catalogue containing images I had captured on my phone-camera, of traffic wardens in action, was withdrawn, not because of any quality

problems but to avoid distracting from the key materials of interest. The images of them did not fit with a desire to avoid voyeurism and objectification, and it would have played too simple an entertainment game in emphasising the conflictual.

The images were found in compressed jpeg format, at low resolution by comparison with the standards of professional photography; the pixelation and compression artefacts<sup>4</sup> became more noticeable when enlarged, automatic camera settings meant that less than ideal combinations of shutter speed and aperture were in use but despite all these faults and others, far more information than necessary for the job in hand was being captured by the wardens. The contravention images still represent what Marshall McLuhan would have described as 'hot media'<sup>5</sup>.

Contradictions are apparent in this combination of poor quality which nevertheless exceeds requirements. Compression algorithms – and jpeg is being used as shorthand here – were introduced as a temporary measure in the 1990s. Compressed photography is looked down upon as a poor relation in the world of images. The palpable hostility of many visitors in the first few days of the *Contra-Invention* exhibition reflected that disdain (and it was amusing to see the situation change once its status had been conferred). These formats and approaches have not only survived but are the norm<sup>6</sup>. As it happens compression is a sophisticated and efficient set of mechanisms which permits image quality to be retained despite dramatic reduction in file size. Jpeg was precisely what the new landscape, the digital network, required. The impact is analogous to the Renaissance innovation of painting on canvas which permitted pictures to be rolled up and made mobile. Artists could work in studios

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<sup>4</sup> 'artefacts', the term of choice used to describe the fuzzy edges and blurriness which is characteristic of 'lossy compression', is interesting here considering the points made later in the paragraph.

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan's division is also a means of discussing media by comparing channels which are information-rich and so leave little to the imagination (hot media) with those which require more effort on behalf of the 'receiver' (cool media) (2001, pp.22–25).

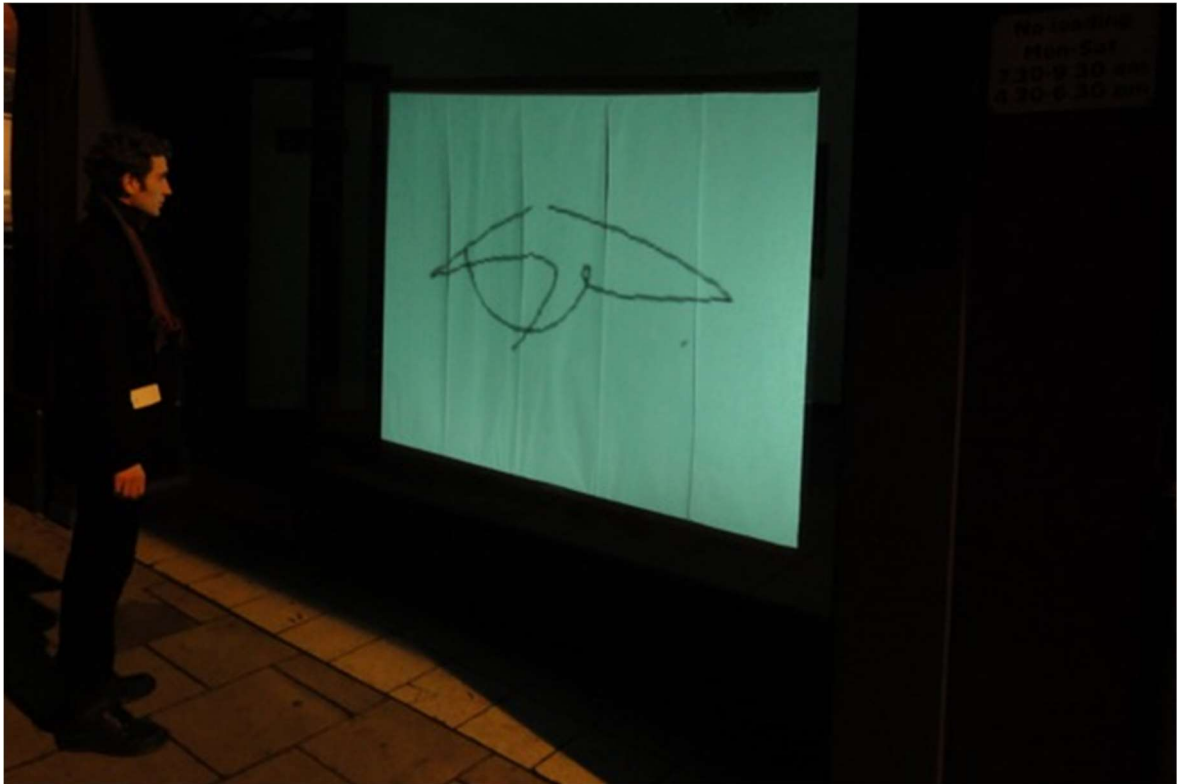
<sup>6</sup> In his provocative first published essay Lev Manovich pointed out that 'lossy compression' was becoming the norm as far back as the mid-nineties (1995)



and escape the restrictions of fresco. The fact of mounting the *Contra-Invention* large prints on lightweight support, normally used for commercial signage purposes, and leaning them against the gallery walls instead of hanging them, was also a reference to this idea of mobility. In an essay which was, with permission, included in the *Contra-Invention* exhibition catalogue, Hito Steyerl waxed lyrical about the worth of 'poor images' (2009). In the old world 'resolution was fetishised as if its lack amounted to castration of the author'; poor images on the other hand are 'heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed.' Steyerl likens the proliferation of imagery online to a proletariat, a potentially underestimated revolutionary class. Painting pre-empts this development in other ways too; Matisse more than once repeated Delacroix's adage that 'exactitude is not truth'. The Impressionists' use of dabs and dashes was proof that there were less pedantic ways to connect with original experience. In selecting three night-shots from the hundreds of mundane contravention images then and blowing them up to the actual size of the car depicted an attempt was being made to engage with factors relating to art history and aesthetics. It is not necessarily ridiculous, nor inflammatory, to hypothesise (as I did during artist talks) that 'Caravaggio would have been impressed' with these corrugated-plastic-mounted monuments to the jpeg.

Since *Contra-Invention* other ways of gently hacking the supply chain have been uncovered. Arts Council England was happy to support an initiative which used the familiar point of delivery signatures (PODS) required by couriers when they hand over packages to receivers. I discovered that, not only was it possible to track the movement of one's own package, but that afterwards a low resolution jpeg version of the final signature was stored online (Figure 9) and what is more all of the files remained available long after the physical exchange. Surprisingly, by simply inventing consignment numbers, it was easy to access others' information including their point of delivery signatures! The exhibition of this work was called *Missing You* (Greslé, 2014), a reference to the Sorry We Missed You cards left by couriers when





**Figure 8** PODS (point of delivery signatures) Norwich, 2013. © Tony George

delivery (frequently) fails, included large prints of signatures, moving-image pieces (Figure 8 shows signatures being back projected onto a window) and a book of these signatures (O’Connell, 2014f). POD happens also to be the abbreviation for my chosen technique and channel of publication: ‘print-on-demand’.

More recently I discovered that it is possible to use the increasingly ubiquitous supermarket self-checkout machines to buy nothing. During two periods, hundreds of receipts were collected as evidence of these non-transactions, and compiled into books entitled *Less* (O’Connell, 2014c) and *More Less* (O’Connell, 2016a). A0 poster versions of the receipts have been distributed (Figure 10). Sound recordings of the encounters with the friendly technology - shoppers are thanked regardless of whether a purchase is made – were interrogated and combined with visual material to create a film (*Exchanging*, 2015). In addition instructions on how to interact and obtain zero transaction receipts have been shared (*How to buy nothing*, 2016).

Final work of two types emerges from these clownish research projects. Firstly, artefacts which do justice to the nature of the readymade data are presented.

41636860 Details			
Reference	28259		
Pick up date	20 Nov 2012		
Delivery service	EXPRESS		
Destination	BRIGHTON		
Delivery date	14:38, 29 Nov 2012		
Items delivered	1 - <a href="#">click here for full list of items</a>		
Items left at	HOUSEHOLD DELIVERY		
Signatory	o connell		
Date	Time	Location	Status
29 Nov 2012	14:38:00	CRAWLEY	Shipment delivered in good condition.
29 Nov 2012	09:51:37	CRAWLEY	Out for delivery.
29 Nov 2012	09:25:59	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
29 Nov 2012	08:11:46	CRAWLEY	Please call
28 Nov 2012	08:10:51	CRAWLEY	Delivery date changed as requested by sender or receiver.
27 Nov 2012	17:49:48	CRAWLEY	Delivery date changed as requested by sender or receiver.
27 Nov 2012	08:05:14	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
26 Nov 2012	21:49:13	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
23 Nov 2012	19:27:08	CRAWLEY	Delivery date changed as requested by sender or receiver.
23 Nov 2012	14:36:05	CRAWLEY	Receiver not home. Follow up action underway.
22 Nov 2012	23:38:55	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
22 Nov 2012	17:35:50	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
22 Nov 2012	01:46:36	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
21 Nov 2012	02:45:22	CRAWLEY	Shipment received at destination depot.
20 Nov 2012	17:15:38	MILTON	Shipment received at origin depot.
<a href="#">back to summary</a> / <a href="#">input screen</a> / <a href="#">Click to view POD image</a>			

Signed by: o connell

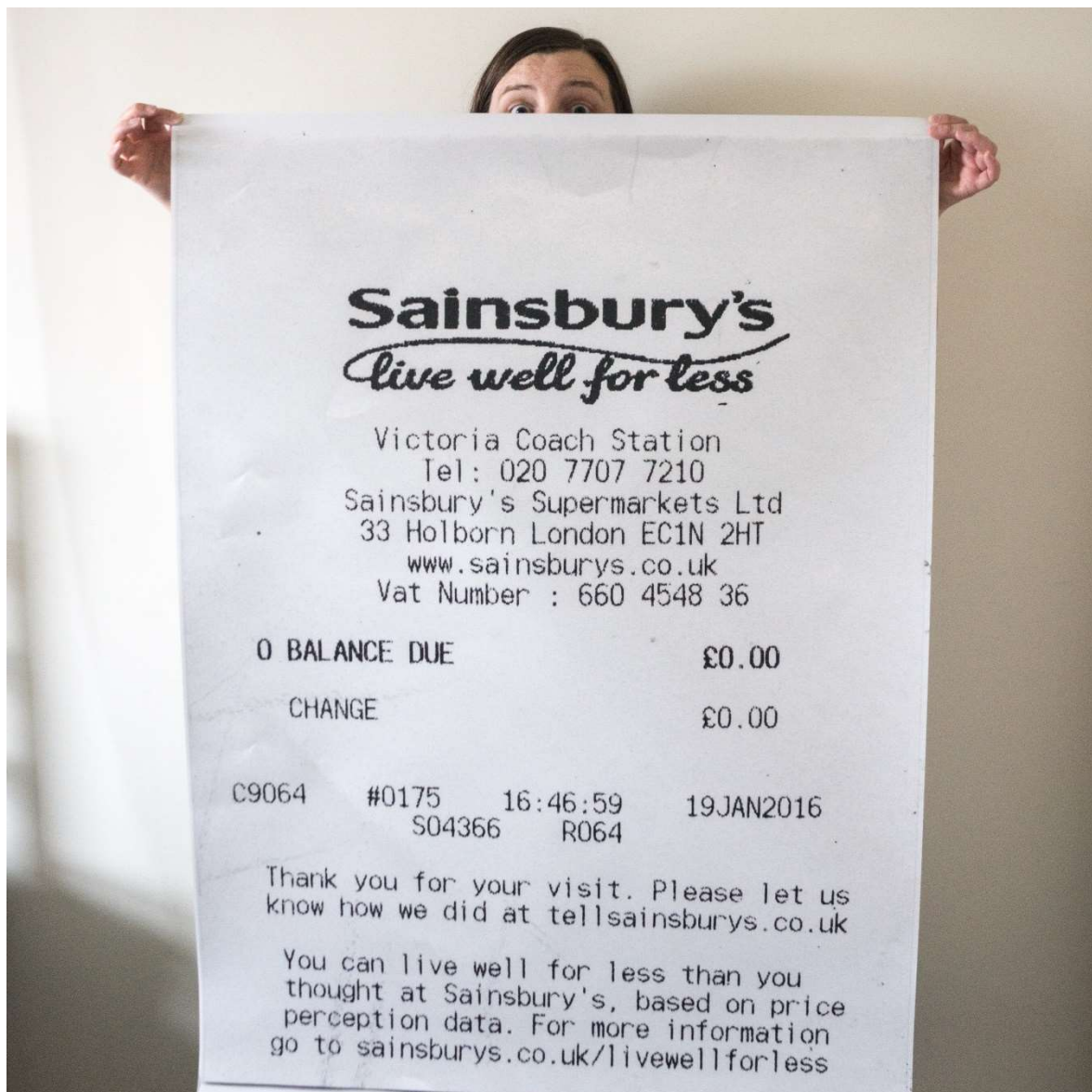


**Figure 9** Parcel tracking data for repeated delivery attempts and POD signature, 2012. © Mocksim

By enlarging or using suitable support, for example, the qualities of the original digital or visual material are only amplified. Secondly, an attempt is made to move away from the origins but not to the extent of losing touch completely. Short looping films, such as *Exchanging* referred to above, which I call 'simupoems' (after Man Ray's cinemoems but with the prefix simu instead for simulation) are produced. They employ contemporary 3D modelling, simulation and 3D scanning techniques and combine influences from collections of objects, data and ideas being worked with. Though unusual or incorrect use of the software is still important in the final development phase, these films are less obviously connected with the intelligence or wit of the original process. They are more abstract and distinct from hacktivism, consciously polemical or 'post-art art' (*John Roberts NCCA Recording*, 2014). In fact, the simupoems, notwithstanding use of cutting-edge tools and concepts, arguably hark back to a time before the end of art. An ambition in creating them is to achieve unexpected shifts in understanding or to prompt an aesthetic experience. The

outcomes ought to embody the process and in that sense the art 'speaks for itself'<sup>7</sup>, which does not in any way prevent other kinds of evaluation and reflection.

Micheál O'Connell a.k.a. Mocksim



**Figure 10** A0 print of a receipt obtained from buying nothing, 2016. © Mel Ede

<sup>7</sup> A somewhat hackneyed phrase but an important one, which can be handled critically (Danto, Horowitz and Huhn, 1998, p.19).

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